**Rock Pocket Mice**

Rock pocket mice live in the deserts of the American southwest. The original species of pocket mice had light-colored coats that blended in with the region's rocks and sandy soil, keeping the mice hidden from their owl predators. Starting about 1.7 million years ago, a series of volcanic eruptions spewed out wide trails of black lava that wove right through the middle of pocket-mouse territory.

Today there are two forms of pocket mice: light-colored mice that live on sandy soil, and dark-colored mice that live on black lava rock. The dark mice came about through the process of evolution. Naturally occurring mutations to coat-color genes produced mice with dark fur. On black rocks, dark mice had an advantage over light mice: they were better hidden from predators. They survived and reproduced, passing their dark-fur genes to their offspring, which still survive today.

Once a favorable variation occurs, it can quickly become the major form in a population. Each year, mice produce more offspring than will reach adulthood. Thanks to natural selection, the offspring with favorable characteristics are more likely to survive and reproduce.



The rock pocket mouse comes in two colors, dark and light. The dark ones blend in well with lava rocks (upper right) and the light ones are camouflaged against sandstone (upper left). Placed in the "wrong" environment, the mice are easy for predators to see.